

ISSUES THAT REVOLVE AROUND THE CONCEPTS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION AND E-LEARNING

Maria Georgiou

School of Education, Northcentral University, 85255 Arizona, U.S.A., Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture, 1434 Nicosia, Cyprus

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to describe and assess the nature of distance education and to analyze the character and characteristics of some of the key issues that revolve around the concept of e-Learning in primary and secondary education. Drawing upon some basic concepts such as distance education, online instructor skills and certification, benefits and drawbacks of distance education, the main argument of the paper is as follows: In a world of globalization and technological evolution, new digital communication technologies have emerged, making an impact and changing the way we work, relax, trade, learn, educate and communicate with each other. Technology is developing and evolving rapidly. If education does not succeed in keeping up with the present trends, will it keep up with those of the future?

KEYWORDS

Distance Education, Virtual Learning Environment

1. INTRODUCTION

As 21st century societies are increasingly organized around knowledge and innovation, it is hard to imagine how school education will be able to keep pace without the use of new technologies (Roschelle et al., 2007). Today the convergence of technologies and its importance in the development of social, financial, economic and educational sectors is opening new opportunities from e-business to tele-medicine and tele-education (Beldarrain, 2006). The increasing availability of information technology and the Internet is challenging our understanding of how education is organized and delivered, creating new learning environments in which students who were isolated are now being connected to teachers from around the world (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Peng, 2009). The nature of the 21st century classroom is changing and distance education is growing at about 30 percent annually (Davis et al., 2007). In a decade, distance education in its modern form of asynchronous, computer-mediated interaction between a teacher and students over the Internet has become an established way of education that is able to provide a complete or partial formal schooling for almost one in fifty students in the U.S. (Bušelić, 2012). The results of a survey revealed that three out of every four public primary school districts offered full or partial online courses (Murphy & Rodriguez, 2008). The results of another research showed that more than 1,000,000 students at the primary school level in the U.S. were engaged in some form of distance education, indicating nearly a 50% increase over 2005-2006 (Glass, 2009). Distance education is an educational situation in which the majority of instruction is based on the use of delivery methods and tools such as independent study, videoconferencing, multimedia resources and other instructional technologies (Journell, 2010; Nguyen, 2015). Instructors and students are separated by time, location, or both and communication happens through the use of computer and related web-based technologies such as Blackboard WebCT or Moodle (Savery, 2005). A virtual learning environment (VLE) is a software system that is designed to support instruction and learning in an educational setting, as distinct from a Managed Learning Environment (MLE) where the focus is on management, by providing Internet-based tools for assessment, communication, uploading of content, peer assessment, administration of student groups, collecting and organizing student grades (Nguyen, 2015).

2. ONLINE INSTRUCTOR SKILLS AND CERTIFICATION

Perhaps the most unique aspect of online instruction is that teachers and students rarely, if ever, see one another. Consequently, online instructors need to use appropriate technologies and approaches in order to know each student, lead and direct student discussions, evaluate students' academic progress and respond effectively to students' needs (Peng, 2009). Teachers and students communicate primarily through email and online discussions and therefore, online teachers should be able to write and communicate well, pay attention to the subtle difference of words, and recognize the tone of their students' writing (Davis et al., 2007). However, the most basic role of the teacher in a virtual learning environment is to build, support and set the climate for the community which includes selecting and managing communication tools as well as encouraging and promoting student engagement and collaboration (Beldarrain, 2006). Virtual learning environments require that the instructor becomes more involved as the students' guide in the process of inquiry and in enhancing discussions and collaborative group work (Journell, 2010). Online instructors need to have excellent time-management skills in order to respond to students' questions and provide feedback on their work in a timely manner since in distance education students have access to online courses every day of the week and every hour of the day (Nguyen, 2015).

It is likely that online teaching will require both the acquisition of new skills and a reduced emphasis on some traditional skills (Journell, 2010; Smith et al., 2005). Consequently, a crucial issue that relates to distance education is teacher certification. Teacher certification involves the process of teachers becoming recognized by the state as expert teachers, and this requires that teachers pass some kind of competency examination that implies they have mastered the art of teaching (Savery, 2005). Teachers are required to have a valid teaching license and ultimately professional certification that ensures the public that a specialist has the required knowledge, skills, and experience for high-quality practice (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Beldarrain, 2006). However, licenses do not necessarily guarantee that teachers have all the competencies required to teach or that they are prepared for the challenges that lie ahead, and therefore a teacher who has a certificate differs from a licensed teacher, one who teaches but is not considered an expert (Davis et al., 2007). A national or state endorsement in online teaching indicates that teachers understand the learning challenges and needs of online students and that they have developed online learning facilitation skills such as conducting effective online discussions, managing and monitoring student progress, guiding collaborative activities, administering online assessments and evaluations (Savery, 2005). However, the largest obstacle to an endorsement in online teaching on one's state certificate is its national acceptance, and therefore it is necessary for the program to be tied to a specific degree in order for the certificate earned to have official weight (Journell, 2010).

3. DISTANCE EDUCATION VS. TRADITIONAL EDUCATION

The importance of e-learning as a solution to educational challenges and the increasing number of students learning online, have increased the need to study more closely the factors that affect student learning in distance education (Cavanaugh et al., 2004). At the present stage there is much debate as to whether distance education provides better student learning than traditional education (Beldarrain, 2006; Journell, 2010; Nguyen, 2015). It is necessary to provide evidence about whether the benefits of distance education outweigh the drawbacks, and if e-Learning is likely to make a valuable contribution to students' education.

Distance Education provides an alternative instructional delivery system with high potential for improving the quality, equity, and efficiency of education (Beldarrain, 2006). Distance education expands access by offering anytime and anywhere education. Students in small, rural or low-wealth school districts are able to take specialized courses that would not be available to them under other circumstances (Journell, 2010). Distance education offers opportunities for students who may be home-schooled because of religious preferences, those who dropped out of school and want to get back, those in hospitals or recovering at home, or those with disabilities or medical needs (Bušelić, 2012; Glass, 2009). As the results of a research study revealed, in California alone, each year 120,000 individuals fail to earn a high school diploma by age 20 and hence, those without high school diplomas are more likely to be unemployed, engaged in the criminal justice system and in receipt of state medical benefits (Cavanaugh et al., 2004). In distance education, asynchronous learning materials are available at any time while synchronous discussions are based on the availability of

teachers and students and not the availability of buildings (Murphy & Rodriguez, 2008). Distance education provides students with the flexibility and convenience to schedule their study and work at their own pace.

A lot of researchers studying the phenomenon of e-Learning noted the existence of equality among learners who receive distance education (Beldarrain, 2006; Journell, 2010). Distance education brings democracy to education and gives students equal opportunities to curriculum and in fact, computer-based instruction may allow equality where educational inequalities presently exist (Peng, 2009). The synchronous classroom is a great equalizer for students of all abilities that, removes some of the prejudices students may experience in traditional classrooms while it also allows students to move at their preferred pace (Bušelić, 2012). Additionally, students do not necessarily feel isolated at the computer but for some the anonymity is empowering, and their ability to speak out is not prevented by the social pressures of the traditional classroom (Journell, 2010). Moreover, in distance education self-disciplined students may perform at a better or higher level because they are free of the learning constraints that are usually present in conventional classrooms (Savery, 2005). The results of a research study conducted by Smith et al. (2005) showed that students' participation in online courses was a valuable experience and that students found the virtual learning environment better than the traditional learning environment.

E-Learning promotes social interaction and maturity and in fact the social component of e-learning seems to benefit more students who are reluctant to speak in the traditional classroom (Journell, 2010). The results of a research study showed that students received more personal attention when they were enrolled in distance education programs while also students' social and emotional growth had changed positively (Murphy & Rodriguez, 2008). Moreover, online instructors organize chats, interact with students via email and they are always ready to answer questions about assignments and therefore, students usually get more out of the lessons than they would in a large class since there is no classroom disruption, but rather, one-on-one interaction is highly encouraged (Savery, 2005). The results of a study revealed that 77% of the surveyed students reported that interaction with other students enrolled in the online courses was valuable because it allowed them to know other students and their views (Smith et al., 2005).

Distance education encourages and promotes the development of important 21st century skills to the students such as communication and collaboration skills while it also improves student achievement and motivation (Beldarrain, 2006; Bušelić, 2012; Smith et al., 2005). The results of a research study showed that approximately two thirds of the students who participated indicated that communication with other students was an important part of their learning in the distance education program (Smith et al., 2005). Moreover, a research report revealed that students working in online settings seemed to be more highly motivated than those working in traditional classroom settings (Murphy & Rodriguez, 2008). As Journell (2010) outlined, a high level of interest and improved task commitment appears when students choose their courses online. Additionally, many researchers studying the impact of e-Learning in relation to student achievement indicated that students receiving distance education tend to show better performance on tests and achieve higher grades (Beldarrain, 2006; Cavanaugh et al., 2004; Tucker, 2001). For instance, the results of Tucker's (2001) study showed that distance education students scored from five to ten percent higher on achievement tests than students in the traditional classroom. Similarly, the results of a meta-analysis revealed that students in online learning conditions performed better than those receiving traditional instruction (Cavanaugh et al., 2004).

Many researchers, scholars, and education policymakers oppose e-Learning and support the idea that distance education can have a negative impact on student learning, achievement, socialization and motivation (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Nguyen, 2015; Savery, 2005). Socialization constitutes a serious problem that relates to distance education because there is an expectation in conventional education that students will learn how to collaborate with others and internalize the norms and values that are necessary in order to live in a civilized community (Peng, 2009). In distance education insufficient attention is given to the teaching of community norms and values and hence, virtual learning environments are less able to socialize students in expected values as compared to their conventional counterparts (Beldarrain, 2006; Davis et al., 2007). In conventional schools, principles such as honesty, respect for self and others, responsibility and citizenship are usually strengthened by face-to-face relationships between students and teachers, and between students, in combination with school procedures such as awards and assemblies (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). As Nguyen (2015) pointed out, socialization opportunities in distance education are reduced because of fewer peers and less face-to-face contact with others. Additionally, the web culture is considered to be isolating and therefore by encouraging students to pursue distance education, the trend towards loss of community may be intensified, something that can result in reduced civic engagement and social connectedness (Barbour

& Reeves, 2009; Journell, 2010). Moreover, in distance education where asynchronous technologies such as email are used, teachers are not able to observe students' affective responses because cues such as facial expressions and body language are absent (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). Furthermore, student interaction in the classroom encourages the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration skills (Peng, 2009). While many distance education programs have developed online forums or chat rooms for students in order to communicate and share ideas, it is only a partial substitute for the interaction provided in the classroom with a teacher and other students (Bušelić, 2012). Online classroom interactions are not the same, in many important respects, as those in traditional classes, and some students struggle in virtual learning environments because the immediacy of student-teacher and student-student interaction is reduced and many communication modes are lost (Murphy & Rodriguez, 2008).

Students in distance education may not have increased opportunities for empathizing with others as compared to their counterparts in traditional education (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). When students acquire and construct their learning through a computer, it is a representation and hence a mediated experience, rather than a direct experience (Murphy & Rodriguez, 2008; Peng, 2009). Consequently, understanding and empathy is likely to be increased when the distance between students and a perceived object is reduced, or when there are minimal changes to the nature of experience through a mediating technology (Beldarrain, 2006). As some researchers indicated, not all students are suited for e-Learning and it has become apparent that there are students who will not develop and be successful in distance education perhaps due to the fact that online courses demand greater student independence and responsibility than traditional courses (Journell, 2010; Savery, 2005). Additionally, students who enroll in distance education should be self-motivated to learn since learning cannot be enforced via the Internet in the asynchronous model (Davis et al., 2007). However, not all students are self-motivated enough to complete a distance education program but rather they need to be in a classroom environment and have real interaction with a teacher in order to thrive and learn the course content (Nguyen, 2015). Moreover, self-discipline is required in order for students to complete online coursework. While being able to set your own schedule can be an advantage, it can also be a disadvantage since, students who cannot manage their time easily and have difficulties with procrastination, usually are not very successful with e-Learning and they perform better with the structure of traditional learning (Bušelić, 2012).

4. CONCLUSION

Schools are being charged with numerous responsibilities and their role is central in helping societies adjust to deep social, economic, and cultural changes. When distance education is developed with identical attention to the enabling details that characterize traditional education, it can effectively complement and expand educational options that are available for students (Beldarrain, 2006). By offering scheduling flexibility, personalization, engaging tools to accelerate learning, and access to demanding academic programs, distance education is not simply an example of school reform model, but rather, it represents the best hope for bringing school reform quickly to many students (Cavanaugh et al., 2004). E-Learning is more than a trend. It is revolutionizing global education by delivering high-quality learning opportunities to all students that can improve how students learn and what they learn, regardless of their ability, background, geography, or income level (Journell, 2010). It is necessary that education policymakers become active participants in the continuing conversations about distance education in order to ensure the systematic implementation of effective e-learning strategies in education (Nguyen, 2015). Countries with strong e-learning strategies will move forward to help students reach their full potential in the digital age (Savery, 2005).

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